

THE FUGITIVE. By HENRY NORMANBY.

Lovers of the sensational will be gratified to their heart's content by this powerfully written little sketch of a criminal pursued by a dog.



HOW the rain fell ! How the wind blew ! How the barges creaked and groaned as they pressed upon each other ! How the river hurried away ! How dark the darkness was ! How dreary, how hopeless, how bitter was the night !

The man came creeping and stumbling and shuffling along, turning to look back at every few steps, furtively glancing about him, starting at every sound—a dirty, unkempt, ragged, wretched being, the fear of his fellows in his slinking, crawling gait ; the fear of death in his restless hunted eyes ; the fear of God in his evil heart.

Constantly he stopped and listened, then shuffled and stumbled on again, sneaking deep in the shadows of walls and houses, though everything everywhere was in shadowed obscurity, avoiding the open places, avoiding men and women, avoiding even children.

Through filthy streets, made filthier by the mire of traffic, through squalid alleys and over dreary wastes he made his way, on and on, mile after mile, stopping only to listen, pausing only to look back. Hurrying stealthily and silently past the homes of men, away to the hospitality of the wilderness. His boots were without soles, and at each halting step his cut and bruised feet left a stain of blood. Blood there was also on his clothes, stale, dull-red, diluted with rain and mud, but still blood—veritable human blood.

Passing the open doors of foul pothouses he breathed more deeply, for the exhalation was fragrant to his nostrils, and the reeking warmth grateful to his starved body, but he dared not enter one of them, dared not even look in ; for men, his fellows, were there congregated together, and light was there, and laughter, and the sound of revelry. There each man knew his neighbour and gazed upon him, face to face ; but he, the outcast and fugitive, was wretched and secret, and a man of darkness.

How the rain fell ! How the wind blew ! How the river hurried away !

Oh, inscrutable mystery of the breathing world ! This fearful man had once been fair to look upon ; his mother had sung him to slumber with low lullaby, his father had taken pride in him, his children had clung to him, holding him by the hand. He had walked abroad freely in the sweet and noble air, and drunk deeply of the breath of the morning. His name

was untarnished, and no sinister whisper assailed it. He had set forth in all the braveries of youth, and the powers of evil had come upon him and compassed him about and brought him surely into this pitiable pass. He had wandered in dark places and stumbled amongst the rocks, and the hand of calamity had lain heavily upon him.

As he crept through the darkness, stopping only to listen, pausing only to look back, his shifting, haunted eyes lighted on a piece of bread, untouched even by the dogs; he snatched it up and shuffled on, devouring it ravenously.

Making his way in the direction of the docks he crossed pieces of waste land, stumbling over loose stones, old tins and heaps of refuse—finding himself at times shut in by hoardings he had to retrace his steps and seek other ways to reach obscurity. He shuddered at the sinister suggestion of the cranes which projected from the warehouses towering above him, he shuddered at the wind, he shuddered at the beating of the pitiless rain.

The short alleys and streets to his right ran straight out to the river-bank, he glanced down each one, hesitating for a moment, then, deciding to seek a more secure hiding-place, he went on and on, always through deserted places, always in the darkest shadows. The sudden blast of a whistle startled him, and at the end of one of the pitch-black alleys he saw the red light of an outward-bound steamship; other lights flashed in turn as the vessel went by, steaming safely through the mazes of the river, going freely out into the abysmal darkness of the deep. He could hear the steady beat of her propeller and the clatter of tackle about her decks, in a momentary silence he could even hear the pilot's order and the rattle of the chains as the wheel swung round.

She passed on, and he, too, resumed his way, flying tardily from the might of the Law. With every accomplished mile hope rose in his heart, every minute was enormously precious, and the minutes and the hours were passing, and his pursuers gave no sign.

Fear had conquered hunger, and holding the filthy piece of half-eaten bread in his hand he slowly hurried along, until at length his weariness became so oppressive and weighed so exceedingly upon him that he could scarcely thrust one foot before the other. Still he struggled on, stopping only to listen, pausing only to look back, until further progress was impossible. Dominated by his weakness he crept into a black alley which, like its fellows, ran crookedly out to the mud of the river, and, without attempting to find any shelter, lay down on the ground. The cessation from movement was sweet to him, even as he lay there, foul and pitiful, chilled to the marrow with the ceaseless, dreary, drenching rain.

For a minute, a radiant perfect minute, he slept, slept and forgot his danger, his sorrow, his unutterable misery. Oh, the sweetness of that brief oblivion; of which pain had no part, neither memory nor tears. The sublime absolution of that fraction of time wherein he was once more young and entirely innocent and magnificently free! It was no guilt-laden soul that slept there, but a child lapped in the loving safety of its mother's arms.

Round him were gathering all the forces of Fate, the tempest of retribution was thundering in the air, and the sea of his destiny was rising with the menace of destruction.

He awoke with a terrible cry, and started up, alert and listening. No, it was imagination, or a dream—nothing. He again lay down, only to start up once more in a few seconds. This time he was not mistaken, he heard with certainty the far-off baying of a dog!

Leaping to his feet, the wretched man hurried away, breaking into a shambling run, and once more through the noises of the night came that faint and far-off cry.

How the wind blew! How the rain fell! How the river hurried away!

He ran stumbling along, no longer stopping to listen nor pausing to look back. On and on through the dreary night, while again came the baying of the dog, more distinct, more insistent—nearer! Through squalid streets, under dripping archways, across roads and down alleys the fugitive hurried; sometimes they had no egress, whereupon he turned back, reluctantly retracing his steps, cursing bitterly the while. Still on, slackening perforce his half trot, half run, into obscurer alleys and yet darker places. At times he fancied the baying of the dog had ceased, and hope rose in his heart; but in the brief silences which followed the wild rush of the wind and the pitiless beating of the rain, it came to him again, distinct, insistent, unmistakable, and always nearer!

For the fraction of a minute it occurred to the wretched man to ask help of his fellows, but he dismissed the thought, knowing only too well that it would be useless. The hand of every man was against him, for even as he had sown so was he also reaping. His own mother had repudiated him and cast him forth. Oh, Father in Heaven, what manner of man was this whose mother turned from him in his hour of need?

He hurried further and further from the lighted streets and the comfortable warmth of taverns, and, keeping always in the shadows, turned down one of the alleys which ended at the bank of the river, thinking that possibly he might find a boat in which to cross.

He stopped for a moment to listen, running on again with the energy of desperation as the deep baying of the dog came out of the night, following him. The bread, which he had only half eaten, he threw away in the vain hope that the dog might be tempted to stop for it.

Still the blood, fresh and bright red, marked every footstep, and still on his clothes was blood, stale, dull red, diluted with rain and mud, but blood, veritable precious human blood.

He was utterly exhausted and spent; his jaw dropped and his tongue protruded; his breath came quickly and laboriously, as of those stricken with swift and mortal sickness, and a great oppression was upon him; his eyes were wild and bloodshot, yet they restlessly glanced hither and thither, seeking a means of escape. His legs gave way beneath him, and several times he fell headlong, only to drag himself up again and struggle on and on—anywhere for safety, anywhere out of reach of the vengeful, implacable beast who followed without ceasing.

Reaching the bank of the river the hunted man saw in a moment that his time had come. The tide was far out, and the boats lay firmly in the thick mud. He made an effort to get out to the edge of the water, but the depth of the mud prevented him, and he hastened along the bank eagerly seeking for any hole or corner in which to hide. For a moment the wind died away, and out of the darkness came the terrible cry of a huge bloodhound. Help there was none, hope there was none, pity there was none! Everything had its allotted task; the sombre clouds were sweeping beneath the stars; the wind was blowing across the earth; the rain was falling upon the just and unjust; the river was hurrying away. Everything was fulfilling its destiny. The man also his.

As the desperate wretch hurried along, looking for a place of escape he suddenly almost fell into an open drain. Lowering himself down to lessen his fall he dropped into the foul sewage which flowed out over the mud to the river, and waded up the drain until he reached the small black tunnel through which the blacker filth ran with a sullen roar.

Within there was nothing but intense darkness, so deep, so sinister and appalling that the man hesitated to enter, but his restless eager eyes, always seeking a means of escape, discerned in the darkness without a monstrous bloodhound, with muzzle almost touching the ground, coming along the river-bank, even as he had come, following in his very footsteps. As irresolutely he gazed at the dog, the animal gave voice to a long, low growl.

The doomed man turned and waded into the horrible depths of the tunnel, while a great splash warned him that the dog had sprung into the sewer and was following him with swift, unerring steps. The sewer deepened as he went on, and he was soon wading waist-deep in the pestiferous liquid which rushed past him. At the same moment something soft, wet, and living leaped upon his shoulder and plunged again into the rushing water.

Behind him came the dog, silent and terrible. As he sank up to the neck the man made a last frantic effort to hold on to the slimy wall of the tunnel; he clutched at it vainly, his feet slipped, and the foul water rushed over him. He rose once more, and the next instant his throat was seized in a fearful gripe. For a moment he struggled, tearing at the dog's head with his hands, then uttered a long and frightful cry, and the performance was over.

Holding the lifeless body of the man in his teeth, the dog swam out into the open air. He dragged it out into the mud, and, having given it a savage shake, just as he might have shaken a rat, turned slowly away and disappeared in the darkness. Immediately afterwards some dozens of small, wet, soft creatures, with pointed noses and glittering eyes, emerged from the black water and made their way to the body with a speed which suggested the expectation of a feast.

And still the rain fell, and still the wind blew, and still the river hurried away.